

**Statement for the Record United States Agency for International Development**  
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**Before the House Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia and Nonproliferation**  
**“The Situation on the Ground in Burma One Year since the Military Coup”**  
**Thursday, February 17, 2022, 10:00 a.m.**

*Introduction*

Chairperson Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the honor of testifying about the important role that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is playing as part of the U.S. Government’s response in addressing the ongoing crisis in Burma. USAID is grateful for our ongoing collaboration with this Subcommittee on all issues, including the situation in Burma.

One year ago, Burma’s military launched a coup d’état that slammed the door shut on Burma’s recent democratic opening. The coup has rolled back development achievements, harming the health and well-being of Burma’s people and threatening advancements in prosperity and freedom that the country had achieved. Today, we see a Burma that is unrecognizable from the country we knew one year ago. The coup has worsened the humanitarian plight of the people. Despite significant obstacles, the people of Burma have not given up—and we stand with them in support of democracy.

To this end, USAID’s work on the ground in Burma continues. Just 10 days after the coup, USAID shifted \$42.4 million in assistance from activities that would have benefited the government to support local civil society, non-governmental organizations, and like-minded private sector partners to directly benefit the people of Burma—not the regime. This marked our first step in adapting to and continuing to provide critical assistance in this quickly evolving context. Over the last 12 months, our team has tirelessly supported the aspirations of the people of Burma for justice, peace, and democracy.

Amid the evolving realities on the ground, USAID increased our focus on promoting and protecting human rights, mitigating violence, and supporting actions that foster Burma’s return to the path of democracy. We continue to improve access to life-saving services for the rising number of underserved and disenfranchised communities and fight COVID-19, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis to support the health of the people of Burma and mitigate the emergence of dangerous drug-resistant variants that could affect us here at home. Our efforts focus on saving lives as well as improving education, livelihoods, and food security. Critically, USAID provides life-saving humanitarian assistance to hundreds of thousands of people across Burma, both those displaced before the coup and the newly vulnerable.

*USAID Programming on the Ground*

Since the coup, the regime has killed over 1,500 people—among them children, journalists, and aid workers—and arrested thousands more for acts as simple as applauding a general strike or hanging up a sign. Violence is escalating, and the polarization between the regime and the diverse groups opposing the coup and the regime is intensifying.

The regime's actions have slowed the international response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, over 438,800 people in Burma are internally displaced post- February 1, 2021, and millions of others are newly vulnerable. The regime's actions in part led the World Bank to conclude that the country's economy contracted by more than 18 percent in 2021, with the UN estimating that the number of people living in poverty could double in 2022, from approximately 25 percent of the population to nearly half of it—or, as many as 27 million people. Families are resorting to selling their belongings just to keep food on the table. Reflecting these trends, the international community is now targeting approximately 6.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance within Burma.

The UN and other USAID partners face harassment, office raids, and other forms of intimidation; through these tactics, the regime is trying to control and exact penalties on its perceived enemies. In a horrific assault by military forces on Christmas Eve 2021, at least 35 unarmed people were killed, including women, children, and two Save the Children staff members.

Despite the hardships, USAID continues to support the health, livelihoods, and education needs of Burma's population and to drive for peace, democracy, and human rights. USAID's comparative advantages are our on-the-ground presence within Burma and across the region, our ability to convene like-minded partners in Burma, and built-in programmatic flexibility. We will continue to adjust our work to make it as effective and high impact as possible, consistent with our principles as well as foreign policy and national security priorities.

### *Democracy, Rights and Governance*

The restoration of the path to democracy is USAID's overarching priority in Burma. USAID partners with a large swath of pro-democratic stakeholders to work to build a common vision for an inclusive, multiparty democracy. These partners include the emerging pro-democracy movement, ethnic organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations, both secular and religious; and like-minded members of the private sector.

Since the coup began last year, long-time former government leaders and civil society activists have been arrested, some are on the run and in hiding, and others have fled the country. To preserve what little democratic space remains, USAID provides grants to independent media houses and journalists to help maintain the flow of credible and timely information despite a deteriorating media environment. USAID also supports democratically elected women members of parliament to learn about the roles they rightfully should have assumed following the November 2020 election. With USAID support, these MPs are finding ways to remain committed to representing their constituents.

USAID partners are working closely with local communities to promote well-being and build resilience among pro-democracy actors during these dark and difficult times, equipping pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders, journalists and ethnic minorities with the basic physical and mental health resources they need to cope with trauma and strengthen their peaceful struggle for a democratic future. Through a new activity launched after the coup, we are providing timely, targeted, and strategic support to human rights defenders and pro-democracy

groups in addition to building bridges between groups that, before the coup, operated separately, such as activists and ethnic leaders. Through this work, we are helping equip civil society with the tools they need to robustly respond to human rights violations and prevent future mass atrocities—while strengthening the foundations of resilience that the people will rely on to achieve their democratic aspirations.

#### Health Assistance, including for COVID-19

Amid the twin crises of crumbling democratic freedoms and swelling humanitarian need, the coup has crippled government services in Burma even as it exacerbated the need for such services. As part of the ongoing civil disobedience movement—indeed as early leaders of it—roughly three-quarters of the health workforce in the public sector went on strike in opposition to the coup, and, in consequence, the regime arrested hundreds of health workers, including doctors.

USAID is working with NGOs, ethnic health organizations, and the private sector to deliver health services, especially in communities heavily affected by the public sector shutdown. This is the approach we took in Burma a decade ago, which illustrates the severity of this setback; before the coup, Burma’s health system had a foundation—however shaky—and was making gains. But today, open hospitals are confirmed in only 38 percent of townships.

**COVID-19:** Burma has the lowest proportion of people fully vaccinated against COVID-19 in Southeast Asia. Transmission of the COVID-19 Omicron variant is on the rise, and the regime has procured vaccines on the open market. We worry about people’s lack of trust in and access to public providers who would deliver these vaccinations. Limited and insufficient vaccinations have been given to internally displaced persons (IDPs).

To date, the COVID-19 Vaccine Facility (COVAX) has allocated but not yet delivered 10.7 million doses to Burma. The regime secured 60 million doses from the People’s Republic of China, India, and Russia and, as of February 13, has administered two doses to about 36 percent of the population. USAID and like-minded donors agree that COVAX can play a special role in facilitating vaccinations for people who cannot or will not seek vaccinations through a regime-controlled rollout. To boost vaccination rates, COVAX should deliver doses through independent, trusted channels, including civil society, ethnic health organizations, non-governmental organizations, and private sector sites, focusing on locations excluded by the regime. UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and Gavi are negotiating the terms of COVAX delivery with the regime that would allow the underserved to get vaccinated. USAID funds site readiness for COVID-19 vaccine doses deployed to Burma in addition to supporting site preparedness, training for vaccinators, and reducing vaccine hesitancy. USAID also supports COVID-19 prevention, testing, and treatment in community clinics.

COVID-19 is not the only health threat in Burma. The country’s TB prevalence, at 338 cases per 100,000 people, is two times the regional average and three times the global average, per the WHO. In past years, USAID increased TB cases identification and treatment in Burma, contributing to a 50 percent decline in active TB prevalence over the last decade. Since the coup, however, TB treatment and case notifications plunged by half. USAID will expand TB diagnostic and treatment services in the coming year to reach patients outside the public sector.

The coup also interrupted care for women and children and people with disabilities, with patients losing access to essential services; USAID expands pre- and ante-natal care and safe delivery with skilled birth attendants and works with local NGOs to provide mental health and psychosocial support for people with disabilities.

USAID remains engaged with our NGO partners to protect health gains. We cannot afford to stand idly by while citizens are failed by the health sector.

### Livelihoods

The combination of the coup and COVID-19 has devastated the economy. In 2021, poverty doubled and the country's GDP plummeted by 18 percent.

**Economic Growth:** Immediately following the coup, USAID redirected our economic growth programming away from training and advisory services for the government to focus instead on the civilian-controlled private sector, especially small- and medium-sized enterprises that ensure the availability of food. These private businesses compete directly with regime-controlled economic enterprises that raise revenue for the military. USAID support for private businesses, cooperatives, CSOs, and business associations directly benefits the communities in which they operate. Lastly, we are monitoring Burma's economic conditions so that humanitarian assistance organizations can make informed crucial decisions about how aid is delivered and so that pro-democracy and ethnic groups can formulate new policies for reviving the economy.

**Agriculture and Food Security:** USAID continues to improve livelihoods, food security, and agriculture. Burma's domestic agriculture markets are still functioning despite rising prices and security concerns. USAID supports market-based solutions to agriculture and food security, including expanding access to finance, to ensure the people of Burma are able to feed themselves. While challenged, our agriculture programs are still operating, even in now heavily contested areas of the country. We are identifying agricultural trends, including weather-related shocks, that are exacerbating food insecurity and humanitarian needs.

**Education:** The coup further exacerbated Burma's nationwide COVID-19-related closure of government schools. Over 12 million children have lost more than a year and a half of education. The regime has started reopening public schools, but over half of the nation's students are choosing not to attend. To help fill this gap, USAID launched a new effort—post coup—to strengthen the quality of basic education provision at non-government, ethnic, and monastic providers. Through direct programming, capacity strengthening, and policy advocacy, our work will help these providers meet the needs of their communities and explore partnership opportunities to educate preschoolers and out-of-school youth.

### Humanitarian Assistance

Over the past year, our immediate concern has been delivering humanitarian assistance across the country, and we reached over 430,000 people with life-saving aid through internal access in 2021. According to the UN, the number of people needing humanitarian assistance in Burma will skyrocket from 3 million in 2021 to more than 14 million in 2022 due to economic instability, escalating conflict, and COVID-19. As of February 7, UNHCR estimates that 809,200 IDPs in Burma are in desperate need of essential commodities and assistance. Recent intensification of

violence has displaced close to 150,000 individuals in the new year alone. Humanitarian relief partners have the capacity to scale programming to assist displaced populations and communities in need, but their ability is constrained; road closures, harassment at military checkpoints, detentions, travel restrictions, and threats of violence on top of post-coup procurement challenges are hindering their efforts. Despite these severe constraints, USAID partners, including the UN World Food Program, continue to deliver food rations and other critical assistance to hundreds of thousands of IDPs while advocating for access to violence-affected communities in newly emerging conflict areas.

**Ongoing Crisis in Rakhine State:** As of January 2022, more than 620,000 ethnic Rohingya remain in Rakhine, with nearly 150,000 displaced internally following the clashes that occurred a decade ago. USAID's humanitarian assistance for Rohingya IDPs and other vulnerable people in Rakhine State continues (as it does for the over 888,000 Rohingya refugees that USAID and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration help support in Bangladesh). We provide protection services, shelter and settlements, essential household items, sanitation kits, and safe drinking water, among other services, including COVID-19 prevention.

### Closing

In Burma the path to democracy is imperiled. In fact, across the Indo-Pacific, we see democratic backsliding, autocratic ascendancy, and unchecked human rights violations. These challenges undermine the long-term stability of the region and puts innocent lives, hard-won development gains, and global stability and health at risk.

For decades, USAID has stood shoulder to shoulder with the people of Burma in their struggle for peace, democracy, and freedom. Today, USAID echoes the global chorus condemning the coup, military violence, and unjust detentions—including health care workers, journalists, technical advisors, democratically elected officials, and others from all walks of life who have objected to the unjust actions of Burma's military. Moving forward, we will continue to look for new opportunities to support the people of Burma as they work to regain what has been lost in the face of a stolen democratic trajectory, rising oppression, and human rights abuses. The people of Burma deserve to live in peace and harmony. They have our support to transform into a truly inclusive democracy.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent USAID. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

